

Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society

US citizens perceive their society to be one of the most diverse and religiously tolerant in the world today. Yet seemingly intractable religious intolerance and moral conflict abound throughout contemporary US public life – from abortion law battles, same-sex marriage, post-9/11 Islamophobia, public school curriculum controversies, to moral and religious dimensions of the Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street movements, and Tea Party populism. *Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society* develops an approach to democratic discourse and coalition-building across deep moral and religious divisions. Drawing on conflict transformation in peace studies, recent American pragmatist thought, and models of agonistic democracy, Jason Springs argues that, in circumstances riven with conflict between strong religious identities and deep moral and political commitments, productive engagement depends on thinking creatively about how to constructively utilize conflict and intolerance. The result is an approach oriented by the recognition of conflict as a constituent and life-giving feature of social and political relationships.

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From Enemy to Adversary

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To Atalia, Yonatan, and Pnei'el Alois

I say we had best look our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of the States are not honestly believ'd in, (for all this hectic glow, and these melo-dramatic screamings,) nor is humanity itself believ'd in. What penetrating eye does not everywhere see through the mask?

The spectacle is appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. The men believe not in the women, nor the women in the men. A scornful superciliousness rules in literature. The aim of all the *litterateurs* is to find something to make fun of. A lot of churches, sects, &c., the most dismal phantasms I know, usurp the name of religion. Conversation is a mass of [banter] ...

The depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than has been supposed, but infinitely greater. The official services of America, national, state, and municipal, in all their branches and departments, except the judiciary, are saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, mal-administration; and the judiciary is tainted. The great cities reek with respectable as much as non-respectable robbery and scoundrelism. In fashionable life, flippancy, tepid amours, weak infidelity, small aims, or no aims at all, only to kill time. In business, (this all-devouring modern word, business,) the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain. The magician's serpent in the fable ate up all the other serpents; and money-making is our magician's serpent, remaining to-day sole master of the field ...

I say that our New World democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses out of their sloughs, in materialistic development, products, and in a certain highly-deceptive superficial popular intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and esthetic results. In vain do we march with unprecedented strides to empire so colossal, outvying the antique, beyond Alexander's, beyond the proudest sway of Rome ... It is as if we were somehow being endow'd with a vast and more and more thoroughly-appointed body, and then left with little or no soul.

Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*

Of course, the old undying elements remain. The task is, to successfully adjust them to new combinations, our own days.

Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*

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